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Germaine W. Huber

Omaha Public Schools, gerry.huber@ops.org

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Women in History— Madame C. J. Walker 1867–1919

Germaine W. Huber

“I have to cancel my hair appointment!” This is a lament I’ve heard and voiced many times, and not one to be taken lightly. The relationship between women and their beauticians is as important as that of a marriage, especially for women of color. Madame C.J. Walker’s name has been synonymous with black hair and hair care products and until I began to research her life for this report, I believed that this was her major claim to fame. I found I greatly underestimated the contributions to African American and American history this extraordinary woman made.

“I am a woman who came from the cotton fields of the South. From there I was promoted to the washtub. From there I was promoted to the cook kitchen. And from there I promoted myself into the business of manufacturing hair goods and preparations . . . I have built my own factory on my own ground.”

—Madam Walker,
National Negro Business League Convention,
July 1912

Sarah Breedlove was born on December 23, 1867, the fifth of six children of Owen and Minerva Breedlove. Sarah was the first of the Breedlove children to be born after the end of slavery. She and her siblings; sister Louvenia, and four brothers, Owen Jr., Alexander, James and Soloman were children of former slaves and lived on a Delta, Louisiana plantation. Her parents died when she was six or seven years of age leaving Sarah and her older sister to survive by working in the cotton fields of Delta and nearby Vicksburg, Mississippi. At age fourteen she married Moses (Jeff) McWilliams and together they had a daughter named A’Lelia, born in June 1885. Mr. McWilliams died in 1887 in Greenwood, Mississippi.

A widow at twenty, Sarah moved to St. Louis where her brothers had established themselves as barbers and was employed as a laundress. The daughter of an uneducated farm laborer, she set about improving her education by studying in public night schools. She befriended women who were members of the St. Paul A.M.E. Church and the National Association of Colored Women and began to broaden her view of the world and its opportunities.

During the 1890’s Sarah began to pay close attention to the advantages

About the Author

Germaine (Gerry) W. Huber is Executive Director, General Administration, for Omaha Public Schools. Gerry has her M.S. in Education Administration from the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Email: Gerry.Huber@ops.org.

that black women could derive from an improved personal appearance. Like many others she suffered from loss of hair, especially from her temples and set about experimenting with different formulas and mixtures to strengthen, grow and straighten the hair. With a new formula created somewhere between 1900 and 1905 and the development of a steel comb that could be heated and used to straighten hair, Sarah began her own business. She sold her products door-to-door in the black neighborhoods of St. Louis.

“I got my start giving myself a start”
—Madame C.J. Walker

In 1905 Sarah moved with her daughter to Denver, Colorado as a sales agent for Annie Malone, another black woman entrepreneur and a year later married Charles Joseph Walker. A newspaper man, he helped her with publicity for her products and she adopted the name Madame C.J. Walker. She began marketing her product under the name “Madam Walker’s Wonderful Hair Grower.” Her marriage to Mr. Walker dissolved in 1912. He died in 1926. Madame Walker’s business continued to flourish and she opened another office in Pittsburg in 1908. It was there that she also founded Leliea College, which gave correspondence courses in her methods of hair care for \$25. In 1910 she moved to Indianapolis where she set up a laboratory and beauty school. Her company was incorporated in 1911, with Madame Walker being the sole owner of stock. She developed a full line of products that included, Hair Grower, Temple Grower, shampoo, Glossine (pressing oil), and Tetter Salve for the skin. Her products emphasized cleanliness, personal hygiene and personal pride. Madame Walker’s business grossed over \$100,000 a year, employed as many as fifteen and had several thousand agents around the country between 1911 and 1916. A modern day “Mary Kay,” Madame Walker organized her agents into local and state clubs. The *Madame C. J. Walker Hair Culturist Union of America* convention in Philadelphia in 1917 was one of the first national meetings of business women in the country. She encouraged the participants’ political activism reminding them, “This is the greatest country under the sun. But we must not let our love of country, our patriotic loyalty cause us to abate one whit in our protest against wrong and injustice.” Madame Walker invested heavily in real estate and owned property in Los Angeles; Chicago, Savannah, St. Louis, Idlewild, Michigan, New York, and Indiana.

Madame Walker's influence and philanthropy stretched well beyond that of hair care and personal grooming. In 1911 she received national recognition for contributing \$1000 to the building fund for the "colored" YMCA in Indianapolis. She became involved in the social and political life in Harlem and supported the NAACP's anti-lynching movement by contributing \$5,000. Madame Walker joined a group of Harlem leaders who traveled to Washington D.C. to present a petition favoring federal anti-lynching legislation after a white mob murdered more than three dozen blacks in East St. Louis, Illinois in July 1917.

Her friends included Booker T. Washington, Mary McLeod Bethune, and Mary Talbert. As her wealth grew she gave increasingly to a variety of African American charities; Flanner House, Alpha Home, the Senate Avenue YMCA, Bethal AME Church, Tuskegee Institute, Mary McLeod Bethune's Daytona Educational and Industrial School for Negro Girls (Florida), Palmer Memorial Institute in North Carolina, Haines Institute in Augusta, GA and the NAACP.

Madame Walker was a staunch advocate of education, the building of personal and racial pride and was active in many protests aimed at discrimination, the War Departments' segregationist, policies and was an alternate delegate of the National Equal Rights League. Early in 1919 she worked with Adam Clayton Powell in the formation of the International League of the Darker Peoples.

In April 1919 Madame C.J. Walker became ill while traveling in St. Louis. She returned home and died on May 25, 1919 at the age of fifty-one. Not just a founder of women's hair and personal care products, Madame Walker was a pioneer of a modern thriving black hair-care and cosmetics industry and also set standards within the African-American community through her activism, philanthropy, entrepreneurship through her faith in her abilities, tenacity and perseverance. She helped to create the role of the 20th century, self-made American businesswoman and leader for the African-American community.

W. E. B. Du Bois's obituary of her in the August 1919 issue of *The Crisis* stated, "It is given to few persons to transform a people in a generation. Yet this was done by the late Madam C. J. Walker." (Brown, ONLINE, 1996).

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